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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001538

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT ALSO FOR EUR/SE

EMBASSY BAGHDAD PLEASE PASS TO RRT ERBIL AND PRT NINEWA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/22/2019

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SUBJECT: GOT REELING FROM RECEPTION GIVEN PKK RETURNEES

REF: A. ANKARA 1508

[1](#)B. ANKARA 1514

[1](#)C. ANKARA 1522

Classified By: Ambassador James Jeffrey, for reasons 1.4(b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Reactions to the return of 34 PKK sympathizers/members from northern Iraq to Turkey have been mixed with negative perceptions rapidly dominating the initial hopes of reconciliation. The exuberant reception by the crowds greeting the returnees had drawn sharp criticism from media commentators and political circles. The Democratic Society Party (DTP) contends that such celebrations are a natural outpouring of "joy" over the prospects for peace. Investigations that could lead to prosecutions against DTP members or the returnees themselves could throw a kink into the process. While this step was designed to help the GOT's Democratic Initiative, the spectacle means Prime Minister Erdogan will be hard-pressed to continue with this potential peace process while keeping Turkish public opinion on his side. Another group of PKK returnees from Europe, scheduled to arrive October 28, will again test the process. Given the GOT's need to show more dividends from this policy, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq should be encouraged to step forward. Action request para 7: Department to work with Embassy Baghdad to attain support from KRG. End Summary.

Reactions to PKK Returnees Mixed

[1](#)2. (C) Reactions to the 34 people who returned to Turkey from Northern Iraq on October 19 has been mixed at best. The Democratic Society Party (DTP) organized tens of thousands of people in southeastern Turkey to celebrate the arrival of the returnees, and continued that celebration the following day in Diyarbakir with rallies, singing, and fireworks. This atmosphere of celebration has been widely condemned in other parts of Turkey as being "provocative." Hasim Hasimi, advisor to PM Erdogan on Kurdish issues, wondered why PKK and DTP flags were seen along with banners bearing the photo of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan -- but no Turkish flags. Hasimi stressed that intentions were less important than the

perception that the PKK was celebrating victory. Prime Minister Erdogan warned DTP leader Ahmet Turk that his party must avoid provoking the state. Erdogan stressed that the government wants to unite all ethnicities as "citizens of the Republic of Turkey." (Note: The use of "citizen of the Republic of Turkey" instead of "Turk" is a marked change in rhetoric and could be seen as an olive branch to Turkish Kurds, who consider themselves part of Turkey, but are loath to call themselves "Turks." End Note.) Erdogan noted the risk of sending the process "back to square one." Sinan Onal, DTP Chairman Ahmet Turk's Advisor, and DTP MP Sebahat Tuncel argued that the exuberant crowds only reflected the people's "longing for peace and an end to the armed struggle."

13. (C) Since the returnees entered Turkey on October 19, prosecutors in four jurisdictions (Silopi, Cizre, Nusaybin, and Diyarbakir) have initiated investigations into the welcome parades and celebrations. Mehmet Emin Aktar, a lawyer from Diyarbakir, stressed that prosecutors are compelled to investigate any gathering that advocates or promotes an illegal organization. He did not believe that the investigations would derail the peace process. However, on October 22, the Chief Public Prosecutor of the Court of Appeals (Supreme Court) initiated an investigation into the DTP for pro-Ocalan slogans and banners at the celebrations for the returnees. Evidence from the investigation could be included in the ongoing closure case against the DTP.

14. (SBU) General Ferit Guler, Turkish General Staff Secretary General, said on October 23 that it was "not possible to

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accept the scenes" from the southeast. Guler stressed that the returnees should avoid behavior that could drag the country into chaos. He also indicated that the Ministry of Defense has initiated investigations as to whether the men among the returnees had performed their compulsory military service. Furthermore, the independent High Council of Judges and Prosecutors has reportedly initiated a study into the actions of the prosecutors and judges that released the 34 returnees to ascertain if they appropriately implemented current Turkish law.

#### European Returnees Will be the Test

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15. (C) Another group of 14-16 returnees will come from Europe into Istanbul on October 28. Tuncel told us that the DTP, along with 23 other organizations in Istanbul, has been granted a permit by the police to hold a welcome rally in Istanbul's Kazlıcesme square. DTP expects between 100,000 and 200,000 people to attend. We stressed that such a gathering seemed a profoundly bad idea because it would exacerbate problems for PM Erdogan as he tries to move the process forward. DTP MP Sebahat Tuncel countered that the DTP, on the contrary, views this organized celebration as a good idea because it serves to control the reactions of the people. She said that there was a "natural" outpouring of "joy" over the prospect of peace. She warned that the absence of an organized event could provoke what she called "high number of hard-to-control youth." Mesut Basturk, a Kurdish community leader in Istanbul, also confirmed for us that a "big exuberant welcome" was expected in Istanbul. Some of our contacts have cautioned that the timing of the return, the day before Turkish National Day celebrations, could provoke violence or negative reactions, especially among nationalists.

#### Erdogan Under the Gun

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16. (C) Murat Yetkin, Radikal Ankara Bureau Chief, while no friend of PM Erdogan, urged the Ambassador October 22 to help Erdogan succeed in this process. The Ambassador then telephoned DTP Leader Ahmet Turk to remind him of US support for the Democratic Opening but to point out that the DTP too

needs to act responsibly. Turk told the Ambassador that he was aware of the position of the U.S. and agreed that Erdogan needs assistance. He said he was working hard to ensure that the PKK "peace delegation" does not come to Ankara. However, other DTP members including co-Chair Emine Ayna are advocating for just such an action. In a conversation on October 23, Tuncel said that the group arriving from Europe and the group from Northern Iraq would come together in Ankara "at some point" to talk to political parties and civil society. They were here, she explained, to participate in a "peace assembly" that would attempt to end the fighting while gaining constitutional guarantees for Kurds in Turkey.

Action Request: Help From Northern Iraq  
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¶7. (C) The KRG, and particularly President Barzani, have long pushed the Turks to take bold steps to reconcile their own Kurds; well, Erdogan is doing just that, but needs help! To be sure, it is clear that, up to this point, the KRG has been playing a major role in the return of the 34 people to Turkey from their region in Northern Iraq. But it is vital that the KRG (and the Kurdish political leadership within the KRG) apply pressure on the PKK leadership to play into the ongoing process in Turkey. Turkey is a strong example of winning a fight against a terrorist insurgency; the momentum is on their side and the coming months will be key in the prospects of bringing a permanent peace. We believe Embassy Baghdad and the RRT in Erbil should remind Barzani and the newly

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appointed KRG PM Barham Salah to take concrete action that PM Erdogan can highlight to show that the GOT's actions are paying dividends in ending the long battle with the PKK. President Barzani's public statements earlier this week were helpful, but our sense is the Turks will need more public support as well as more KRG pressure on PKK irreconcilables.

Comment  
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¶8. (C) It is possible that the scenario for Wednesday's arrival of a second group from Europe has gone well beyond the DTP's ability to control, and they are doing their best to ensure a peaceful gathering. That said, Erdogan is in a tight spot. On one hand, he cannot be seen as supporting a process where the PKK appears to return victorious to Turkey after defeating the Turkish military. On the other, he cannot be seen by the Turkish Kurds as obstructing or harming a process towards peace and the recognition of certain rights -- the non-recognition of which they have viewed as validating PKK violence against the state. The process has to be seen by the Turks as government-driven, and a process where PKK members are submitting to the will of a unified Turkish state. This position will be hard for PKK members in the mountains of Iraq to accept. Support from the KRG and the Kurdish parties in the KRG will be vital in assuring that the fledgling and incredibly fragile peace process continues to move forward. Any failure of this process has the potential to completely derail the government's democratic initiative.

JEFFREY

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